Sections
Focus
Columns and Reviews
Consulting
Training
News & Announcements

Archives
Browse past issues of Praxis

About Us
About Us

Submissions
Submit an article to Praxis

Home » Archives » Spring 2008 (Volume 5 Issue 2) - Authority and Cooperation

"So rudely forced": Student Writers, Course Requirements, and the Writing Center

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Liberatory educational practices can rescue students from the wasteland of dreaded writing assignments

I.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?…

Glenda Conway

In their article advocating a liberatory approach to tutoring, Tilly and John Warnock express a view that the "most serious problem most writers have is having no place they want to get as writers" (16). As those of us who teach or tutor writing know all too well, students often seem aimless and unmotivated when they work on school-sponsored writing assignments. Typically, they feel no personal stake in what they write, and the only satisfaction they seek is to be finished. Such students, in my view, are real-life occupants of an academic wasteland, drifting wearily and disinterestedly through a time that offers them rich potential for thinking and learning. Their disengagement is eerily reminiscent of the empty lives of the residents of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*: fragmented, joyless, and commanded by outside forces.

Teachers and tutors of writing are particularly aware of the frequent tendency of students to conceive of course writing assignments in terms only of due dates, rather than in terms of their full experience as students–as humans–learning about a particular subject matter. We know well that paper assignments are painful and unpleasant: they cause students to lose sleep, to get behind on other courses, and to feel generally interrupted and

inconvenienced in their attempts to maintain control over their academic and social lives. While it is true that some students in some classes will receive a paper assignment with open arms and then proceed to work on it with energy, purpose, and enthusiasm, the response most of us know is the one in which paper assignments are feared and dreaded.

I propose that writing center personnel are in an ideal position to introduce and model a different and better view of the academic paper-writing enterprise. My proposition is informed by the principles of liberatory education, which are at the foundation of my belief that every writing occasion presents an opportunity for purposeful expression–even when the writing occasion originates with a teacher-made assignment. Unfortunately, it is quite likely that many student writers have never thought of their school assignments as opportunities for anything other than producing an item that will be graded. This way of thinking stems from the fact that school-sponsored assignments nearly always require students to write about content at the same time they are being introduced to it. Students are well aware of their position as novices composing texts for specialists, and most, quite justifiably, feel uncomfortable about the situation. Because of this discomfort, many student writers may not feel intellectually confident about their ability to identify and commit to strongly felt arguments as they compose papers for their classes. Writing center personnel need to be aware of the debilitating effects of this lack of confidence. Tutors and other writing center practitioners can introduce students to the concept of academic conversations, and they can encourage students to feel (or become) sufficiently informed and confident to enter these conversations. In addition, tutors can remind clients that writing assignments give them purposeful chances to challenge beliefs and propose new ways of knowing. Finally, tutors can model approaches that encourage students to accept–perhaps even embrace–their school writing experiences as valuable, valid opportunities to develop and refine their perceptions and beliefs about the world.

II.

Do
You know nothing? Do you see nothing?…
Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?

Nearly all students learn, sometime during their educations, that going to school is not fun. As T. R. Johnson writes in his 2001 *CCC* article, "School Sucks," most students develop "a supremely negative reaction against the experience of being in school" (623). In particular, Johnson argues, students "cultivate [a] keen dislike of writing because they have picked up innumerable indications from us that it is nearly impossible for them to win a place in the professional conversations of the academy" (643). Even if Johnson's dire view of school-sponsored writing is overstated, its essence certainly rings true for those of us who have heard the collective gasps and sighs when we have made the simple request that our students take out a sheet of paper. Asking students to write, or should I say, requiring them to write, is an action that nearly always causes them to feel fear and self-doubt.

It seems almost tragic that people taking part in activities that have a very real potential of developing their pride and well-being can do so with an indifference to experience that turns their

lives–at least temporarily–into wastelands.

Composing-process researchers have noted that students often respond to school-sponsored writing assignments by dissociating themselves–both intellectually and emotionally–from the task. Writing may be something they have to do, but not something they necessarily have to care about. Janet Emig's 1971 report, *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, documented the bland and dutiful approaches even the most high-achieving and ambitious of students took when they worked on assigned writing. Emig found that students, when asked to write, composed "matter-of-factly" (84), showing concern about surface features such as "spelling, handwriting, and length" (73) rather than for their subjects or their feelings about their subjects (89). Emig also observed a total absence of ceremony associated with the completion of an assignment. Getting finished with a school-sponsored writing project, according to Emig,

> is a mundane moment devoid of any emotion but indifference and the mildest of satisfactions that a task is over. All [of the writing sessions] end with phrases like "Well, that's it"; "Do you want me to proofread or don't you care"; "I guess that does it"; "Well, here it is." (87)

These accounts are reminiscent of the apathetic feelings of *The Wasteland*'s typist after her dismal sexual encounter with the carbuncular clerk:

> She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
> Hardly aware of her departed lover.
> Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
> "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." (44)

It seems almost tragic that people taking part in activities that have a very real potential of developing their pride and well-being can do so with an indifference to experience that turns their lives–at least temporarily–into wastelands.

Another foundational study in composition, Sondra Perl's "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," presents further evidence of students not knowing where they should "go" as writers. Perl observed that unskilled student writers, in ostensible attempts to avoid errors, focused on word-level concerns during the drafting stage, to the detriment of their texts' overall meaning. These students' "premature and rigid attempts to correct and edit their work," Perl concluded, "truncate[d] the flow of composing without substantially improving the form of what they [had] written" (52). Perl hypothesized that unskilled college writers, perhaps because of the frequency with which errors had been marked on their previous school compositions, conceived of writing as a "'cosmetic' process where concern for correct form supersedes development of ideas" (58). The result, Perl concluded, is that any "excitement of composing, of constructing and discovering meaning, is cut off before it has begun" (58).

III.

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?
"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
"With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
"What shall we ever do?"

Students enter writing centers for various reasons: some have been coerced, some have been commanded, some have been encouraged, and some have made the choice completely on their own. It is highly unlikely that any students come to their schools' writing centers seeking excitement or discovery, and most definitely they don't come looking for pleasure. Still, I will argue, writing center practitioners should not feel deterred from trying to incite feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that might lead students toward positive intellectual development and confidence. It is not only a good strategy but actually the right practice for tutors to use approaches that encourage students to view their school-sponsored writing assignments as opportunities to develop and refine their perceptions and beliefs about their course material.

[M]any students consciously distance themselves [...] from the academic process even as they participate in it. This distancing makes them [...] needful of progressive, caring, liberating pedagogies.

The disheartening reality is that most students have a history of being in educational systems that have cast them as "the one[s] who [do] not know," an identity that influences students to adopt an "attitude of passive receptivity that lacks all wonder and delight" (Warnock and Warnock 20). The late Paolo Freire, whose radical efforts to bring literacy to his fellow Brazilians led to his being exiled for sixteen years, described the traditional teacher-student relationship as analogous to a banking relationship "in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 208). Freire's view of "banking-style" education was that it treated "knowledge [as] a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (58). The banking-style approach teaches students to wait to be told what they need to know and then wait again to be told what to do with that knowledge. In other words, the banking method teaches students to grow into obedient workers who will follow instructions, defer to authority, and accept the status quo. It is a method that "serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed" (209).

Freire's liberatory approach to education is based on dialogue rather than on the transfer or depositing of information. Its goal is to help students learn to think and live for themselves. It "consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (213). The liberatory method "affirms [learners] as beings in the process of becoming–as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (217). It is a "hopeful," even a "revolutionary" methodology (217). To bring Freire's liberatory pedagogy into the writing center is to practice tutoring that encourages writers to become invested in their projects and to view them as opportunities rather than burdens.

IV.

We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key….

As a college freshman during the 70s, I was a struggling writer in my honors composition course–shamed by my inability to understand what I was supposed to write when my teacher made assignments, humbled by the brilliant observations made by my classmates during discussions, mocked by the

continuing appearance of the letter C beside the teacher's terse end comments on my papers, and embarrassed even before myself by how weakly I was performing. There was no writing center on my campus, and I fear that, even if there had been one, I wouldn't have entered its doors. I had always been good at school. I had high entrance exam scores. I had spent the previous summer reading books off a list of classics provided to me by one of my high school teachers. I had entered college thinking of myself as a good writer. I was an English major. To have sought tutoring in a writing center would have meant revealing myself to someone–beyond my teacher, that is–as not knowing what I thought I should have already known.

As it turned out, I stayed in college despite my lackluster performance in freshman composition. I remained an English major–one who struggled to write good papers. Sometimes my papers succeeded, and sometimes they flopped, but I could barely discern the differences between the successes and the flops. Only when I was a junior, when my Renaissance literature professor required his students to meet with him after he had read our first papers, did I actually talk to someone about my writing. The afternoon I entered his office for my fifteen-minute appointment, it was with much anxiety. I had written an explication of a poem by John Donne, and I was sure I would feel ashamed after hearing what he thought of it. It turned out, however, that, even though my teacher had several serious concerns about my organization and my clarity, he was sure that I could work on the paper again and make it successful. He was right. As I worked on my revised explication, I was aware of areas where I needed to clarify how the text influenced my interpretations, and I suddenly understood the great service performed by the thesis statement. I also knew I had an interested reader who believed I had something important to say.

The mission of a "progressive educator," Paolo Freire argues, should be to "unveil opportunities for hope" (*Pedagogy of Hope* 9). The fact that Freire worked to bring hope to citizens who were oppressed by a government that sought to limit their literacy may seem to make his theories and practices irrelevant to teaching practices in the United States. I believe, on the contrary, that Freire's approaches are quite pertinent. Despite all our leaders' claims that the United States champions education, the great majority of students in our country do not appreciate that education. Indeed, many students consciously distance themselves as much as possible from the academic process even as they participate in it. This distancing makes them just as needful of progressive, caring, liberating pedagogies as the illiterate and oppressed third world citizens Freire so much wanted to help. Education should not be something simply to be "gotten over and done with." My hope is that all of us who have the opportunity will do all we can to help students see their educations–and in particular their writing assignments–as true, meaningful occasions to fully experience and participate in their worlds.

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